University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies
October 7, 2009
Speaker: Yiorgos Kalogeras
Topic: "Entering through the Golden Door: Cinematic Representations of a Mythical Moment"

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University
Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University
Attendees: Nikki Leger, Karen Van Dyck, Lyssi Athanasiou, Christos Tsiamis, Sotirios Bahtsetzis, Nelson Moe

Summary of Presentation:
Professor Kalogeras's presentation tackled the question of how European immigrants to the United States are depicted in filmic representations. He focused on three films—Elia Kazan's *America, America* (1963), Pantelis Voulgaris's *Brides* (2004), and Emanuele Crialese's *The Golden Door* (2006)—that pose a clear divide between the pre-modern (old country) and modern (U.S.) and interrogate the meaning and cost of entering industrialist modernity from a pre-industrial society. The two latter films in this triad also seem to pay tribute to the older one, perhaps even entering into direct conversation with it. The plot of each focuses on the moment or process of transplanting, on the transcontinental or transatlantic journey, and on the entry into the new country. They deal with the issue of immigrants who are in some sense Americanized before immigration, and the question of what makes them finally Americans when they arrive in the new country. In other words how the issue of whiteness relates to these southeuropeans.

America, America is in a sense the foundational text, the first Hollywood movie to focus on European immigration. It is a personal film made by the director, a movie that loosely deals with his family history: Stavros Topouzoglou, the main character, is based on Kazan's uncle Joe (Avraam Kazanjoglou), and the film focuses almost exclusively on him and his trials and tribulations. The film was conceived as a docudrama, and the black-and-white filming gives the sense of an amplification of the real, since black-and-white is often considered closer to reality. The movie is set in 1895, at the time of the first Armenian massacre, and the location is Cappadocia, the Anatolian plateau, in the Ottoman empire. *Brides* is a Greek blockbuster whose historical moment focuses on the immigration of women to the U.S. and reflects on an actual incident when the *King Alexander* sailed from Greece to the U.S. carrying 700 mail-order or picture brides. Set in August 1922, after the collapse of Greek front in Asia Minor, this movie is about collective migration, not just individual love story of the protagonists. *The Golden Door*, a film that plays between fantasy and reality, fictionalizes Sicilian immigration at the turn of the twentieth century; it, too, is film about collective migration to the U.S. The main characters are members of the Mancuso family, Salvatore, the father, and his two sons, Angelo and Pietro as well as Salvatore's mother Fortunata.

All three of these movies pose the protagonist between pre-modernity and modernity, place great emphasis on the distance, in time and space, between the eventual destination

of the U.S. and the exotic starting locations of Anatolia, Thrace, and Sicily, emphasizing their unreality from a modern point of view. All three of the movies also begin with scenes that echo one another: on the mountain, the protagonist receives a sign there that leads him or her down to the sea and eventually to America—from the pre-industrial to the modern, and eventually to the industrial. One implicit question in these movies is whether the people depicted are European: we see Stavros as an Oriental Candide, the women in *Brides* depicted as chattel, and the Italians in *The Golden Door* as ignorant, superstitious peasants. In each of these movies modernity has already arrived in the "old country," and is represented as technology—which is always construed as disastrous, a threat. The telegram in *America, America* that comes from Istanbul to the provincial capital brings disaster to the Armenian community; in *Brides* photography is functional rather than artistic, and associated with prostitution; in *The Golden Door* photography is also related to deception, with photographs that show money growing on trees in the U.S., and so on.

Kalogeras then showed a clip of the last seven minutes of *America, America*. In the conclusion of the film, Stavros arrives in Ellis Island and, under threat of deportation, he takes the name of his good friend, an Armenian boy with tuberculosis who, knowing he won't survive in the U.S., sacrifices himself for Stavros's sake. Thus an Ottoman Greek assumes an Armenian identity in order to assume an American one. In the context of the America of the 1960s, where a commitment to ethnic identity or political commitment is becoming increasingly important, Kazan shows us Armenian prospective immigrants and labor organizers who don't make it, and Greeks who ignore or manipulate ethnic identity and do survive. The political is thus perhaps something that, in Kazan's view, has to be done away with in order for immigrants to survive in the U.S. Kalogeras mentioned Toni Morrison's argument about this final scene, where a black shoeshine boy is chased away from the door to a shoeshine stand where Stavros is now working, in which immigrants seem to internalize the racism of the U.S. and thus becoming white through the differentiation of self from blacks. Stavros, Kalogeras added, seems to condone his own exploitation by a capitalist business ethics by establishing his white identity in this racialized society.

Kalogeras then showed a clip from *Brides*, which bypasses completely the moment of entry, and instead gives us the scene of recognition between Niki and her prospective husband, and then moves into the integration of Niki within the Greek community. We see her changed clothes and hairstyle, her now-pregnant body, and a scene in the post office: an example of the conflation of modernity and bureaucracy. However, this movie replaces the scene before the immigration authorities with the "love letter" that Norman sends her where he states explicitly the immigrant complex: they are from different worlds he and she "worlds that never meet." In this he refutes her whiteness or at least the fact that she is as white as he is. The narrative of the movie also denies the happy ending of the American romance: Niki and Norman, the main protagonists of the film, don't end up together. Instead, we have a return to family duties, as Niki is going to the U.S. to marry the man her sister has rejected. At the very end of the movie, we have an image of Niki's face on the cover of *Society* magazine, in a photograph Norman had taken of her on the boat. If Niki has been modernized by way of Norman's camera, she has also been

fetishized, both in the magazine cover and in the earring he wears on his tie, which we see in a close-up at the very end of the film.

In closing, Kalogeras showed a clip from the last several minutes of *The Golden Door*. We see the family being questioned by the immigration officials, and told that the grandmother and one son will not be allowed entry into the country; the father must choose whether to have the rest of the family enter without them or whether they should all turn back together. The movie then ends with Nina Simone singing "Sinnerman", and images of the characters swimming in milk. We thus simply encounter this bureaucratic modernity but can't break through; there is no entrance to the U.S. except in fantasy, which literalizes the metaphor of the "land of milk and honey."

Summary of Discussion:
Q: It seems like the end of this film actually entirely scrambles the notion of entrance. Yes, they're blocked, but we don't see the fantasy of entrance, we see the fantasy of some magical kernel being activated. It's beyond the fantasy of that trajectory of entry into America, it leaves the whole question up in the air. It's not inviting us to consider the possibility of entrance, that consolatory and sublimating image. But with regard to Morrison's reading of the final scene in Kazan's film, could you clarify how the centrality of the Armenian experience challenges Morrison's idea of the Greek and the black?

A: Morrison says the most important moment of the film is when he kicks the black away from the store and says, "Get away, this is a business." I think she overemphasized this moment at the expense of a longer argument that Kazan poses through the movie and which relates to the possibility of Stavros espousing Armenian militancy. I think that the renunciation of such militancy on Stavros's part is important for his establishment as a white American. It is the one thing he has to work out of his system in order to conform to the American standards. Whenever I show this movie to my class, they always misconstrue the theme—they think it's the paradigm of the good Greek and bad Turk. I don't think that's the point at all, and I think the predominance of the Armenian friends with the different ideological options they represent is central to shifting out thinking about it.

Q: Can you say something about the book *America, America*? Because that scene that's so important to Morrison simply isn't in the book. It stops when he comes into the U.S. and receives the money and the hat. Everything is the same except that, and I wonder if perhaps the genre of the film demands more closure than the book.

A: I didn't notice that, but I'll certainly go back and look at the book.

Q: Doesn't the scene when he smiles at the end refer back also to some scenes early on in the movie when he's still in Asia Minor, and is advised to smile? It's a kind of subservience, which links up the early Asia Minor context to the American one, perhaps a critique that nothing is really different here than it was back there.

Q: And the book begins with the Anatolian smile.

A: That was originally the title of the movie, and there are many instances of this throughout the film. That's how you survive as a subject people in the Ottoman Empire. And that's Kazan's idea of the Greek American community, that they survived by smiling to the American officials, and because they condoned through smiling their exploitation in a capitalist society. This smile became a means to an end, he seems to imply. He condones conformity. He presents this issue in such an enticing way, he's a wizard of cinematography, of telling a story. Whenever I show my students *On the Waterfront* I have similar trouble convincing them that it's not okay to betray, because the way he presents it, it's an apology for what he himself did in 1954. I think *America, America* is also an apology, in a way, a very personal film.

Q In the last scene of the Italian film, it sets itself up as very pictorial, which makes me think of something like *L'America* the 1995 film, which is very conventional in its full frontal focus on the faces of the immigrant that elicits a sentimentalization of the part of the viewer. But *The Golden Door* already begins to interrupt that because of the joking repartee, and then in the fantastical, surreal scene at the end, the people become dots from above, which interrupts any kind of viewer-protagonist relationship, and burlesques the sentimentality. In all the examples there's a focus on the faces: the smile in *America, America* and Greek survivalism and subservience; the rewriting of the picture in a market economy in *Brides*. I've been thinking about that focus on the face of the immigrant, and looking at more contemporary Greek movies where I think that's interrupted. I definitely see that in the Italian example as well.

Q: I found the ending of the *Brides*, with the picture of the woman in a magazine, to be a transportation of the pre-modern idea of the image of the face as a photograph: first it's something you can send in the post, and then we arrive at the modern version, which is the picture of the face of the woman in the magazine in the city. This is a very interesting change in the use of the photograph, how its function changes throughout the film, and is pivotal as a kind of anchoring movement around which the story develops.

A: Yes, we have the transition of photography as pornography at the beginning of film to the photograph as a commodity at end of film. Norman isn't allowed to publish his photographs in Turkey, but in the U.S. what does he do with them? There's this ironic transition from the pornographic to the commodified. And in both cases I think the face of the woman remains fetishized.

Q: I found this juxtaposition really helpful, thinking about how when you go between two cultures you're also working between two languages. And with all of the moments of arrival there's also a moment of linguistic movement, too. In Kazan, there's a phonetic transliteration of the name from one language to the other, moving from Greek to Armenian to English, and there is also playing with the harness that's left, Joe Arness and the harness that's left behind when he enters the country. In the second one there's the Greek and English addresses on the letter, from the lover, and Norman's letter in

Gringlish. And then in the last film, we have the translation and the mute, the thing that can't be said. I wanted to hear more about translation in these films.

A: I don't know what to say there, except that we do have this kind of multiple voice appearing. In *America, America* the language is English throughout, and I hadn't thought about the Gringlish text that appears in *Brides*. But there is this play with language, the harness and Arness; his harness characterizes him as a slave in Constantinople and of course the new name burdens him with a new kind of subjection to the capitalist structures of modernity.

Q: I wanted to come back to issue of moving between languages. The moment of immigration is depicted as him getting the name right, and particularly getting the accent right. So it's this movement between languages, learning to say it properly. I can't believe how sustained that is, the scene lasts so long—and so it seems like that moment is in some way so more important than the stamp he'll get.

A: Yes, it's a crucial moment in immigration to America, the changing of the name, and it's done very ironically here.

Q: But it's also interesting that it's ironical, and then you have the moment of the kissing of the ground, which is so unironic.

A: And the producers really didn't want it to be there. There's also a religious context that I didn't have a chance to talk about, Hohannes Gardashian is almost an itinerant monk, and we see his self-sacrifice from the beginning, when he gives Joe his shoes. And then at the end when the uncle says "He's saved," we see America as the savior of the people, the sotiriological aspect of American ideology that's being promoted through the movie. Kazan didn't make another movie for a long time, he had put all is heart and soul into this movie and was disappointed when it didn't do well at the box office. But the time wasn't ripe for this kind of movie. I think it's also a turning point in American cinematography, no one had done an immigration movie of this type. There's also *Pelle the Conqueror*, a Swedish film, but it was made in the late '60s or early '70s, after Kazan. It's interesting to me how these other movies follow Kazan's structurally. Though about a third of the Italian movie deals with the immigration officials, the intelligence tests the immigrants had to take to enter the country. I think Kazan manages to do this documentary aspect much better, and more succinctly.

Q: One also has to mention *The Godfather* here: since Kazan's movie came out in 1963, this might have been the kind of model for what Scorcese followed.

Q: Do you know anything about the falling out between Voulgaris and Scorcese? I had seen *Brides* at the Greek film festival and tried to get a copy of the film and no one at Scorcese's office would even respond. I heard that it was about how much English was used. The Greeks say that he then went to Italy and produced *The Golden Door*, the movie he'd wanted Voulgaris to make.

Q: Is this a way of approaching Voulgaris's way that can bring out much of interest? Because it's pretty bad, right, as a movie? Does it have an academic interest?

A: I should confess that I haven't watched the whole film at one sitting; it's hard for me to watch the melodrama this movie conveys. And what's even more embarrassing is that my students start crying.

Q: I've read a Kourtovik's review of *Mikra Agglia*, Karystiani's novel in which she picks on this rich structure which has to do with transnationalism, this small island in the middle of the Aegean constituted by sailors, trips, captains in far-flung parts of the world who all ascribe meaning to very small place. But she entirely misses the theoretical potential of her scenario, and Kourtovik says that's precisely why she ends up with a best-seller on her hands. You watch *Brides*, then, and wonder if she's watched Kazan. Does she enter into any kind of dialogue with it?

A: Well, *Brides* is certainly not a feminist film.

Q: No, Kazan's movie is much more interesting in its representation of women.

Q: Though they all ask the question of how you deal with a kind of past. In *Brides* you have this extreme narrative, which is way too sentimental, the Italian film gives this play between reality and fantasy, and all the humor involved. Do you see there a kind of difference in how you deal with this common story around the same time? Why does one go more for the appeal to sentimentality and the other for this switch between reality and surreal?

A: It's a problem with the new Greek cinema in general, they don't understand the issue of irony and humor as well as the Italians do. We have very funny Greek comedies from the '50s and '60s, but when you get to the 1970s on we put on our suit and tie, so to speak, we become serious that is, and we're not supposed to smile. It's a different kind of aesthetic approach to film. In *The Golden Door* there are melodramatic moments, but then there's always the slap on the back that lightens the mood.